

CONCERNING BEHAVIORS, STRESSORS, AND MENTAL HEALTH: LESSONS LEARNED FROM ACTIVE SHOOTER INCIDENTS

Terrorism and targeted violence prevention programs and law enforcement may learn potentially concerning behaviors from active shooter events:

- Bystanders observed an average of four to five concerning behaviors by active shooters before shooting incidents. The most commonly observed categories of concerning behaviors included those regarding the offender's mental health (62 percent) and interpersonal interactions (57 percent).
- Active shooters experienced three to four stressors during the year before committing their attacks. The most commonly reported stressors included those regarding mental health (62 percent), financial strain (49 percent), job-related stressors (35 percent), and conflict with peers (29 percent).
- Active shooters demonstrate a higher rate of suicidality than the average population, with almost half of active shooters having suicidal ideation and/or behavior before their attacks. Emphasis on suicidality provides a gateway for law enforcement intervention.
- When comparing high-risk disrupted actors with active shooters, individuals are 16 times more likely to become active shooters if at least one bystander does nothing after observing concerning behaviors, suggesting that the person of concern may interpret bystander inaction as permission to act violently.

BEST PRACTICES TO SUPPORT BYSTANDER INTERVENTIONS

Terrorism and targeted violence prevention programs and law enforcement may implement the following best practices to support bystander interventions:

- Avoiding isolating bystanders by limiting humiliation and social stereotyping during interactions
- Customizing approaches to take into account a bystander and a subject's unique relationship
- Employing an empathy-centered approach when engaging bystanders who may be suffering from burnout or stress associated with attempts to address a subject's concerning behaviors
- Expanding outreach programs about online safety, to include information about terrorist recruiters and propaganda
- Improving partnerships among social service providers, community authority figures, and law enforcement to increase willingness to report
- Offering opportunities for parents to connect with other parents whose children have radicalized or mobilized to violence
- Providing multiple opportunities for bystanders to seek assistance from law enforcement or social services personnel, including using hotlines and local in-person interactions

Each FBI Field Office has a Threat Management Coordinator (TMC), who serves as the point of contact at the local level for threat assessment and threat management-related matters. All TMCs receive advanced training, mentoring, continuing education, and support from the FBI's national-level Behavioral Threat Assessment Center (BTAC). This resource may be found online at <https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/>

FBI's National Threat Operations Center (NTOC), which operates continuously, serves as a centralized hub for tips, complaints, and other information about ongoing or potential federal crimes. They may be reached by phone at 1-800-CALL FBI or online (E-Tips) at www.tips.fbi.gov.

UNDERSTANDING BYSTANDER INTERVENTIONS TO PREVENT TERRORISM



BYSTANDERS' ROLE IN TERRORISM AND TARGETED VIOLENCE PREVENTION

BYSTANDERS are individuals whose relationships and levels of interaction with a person enable them to become aware of activities or behaviors that indicate that an individual is on a path to violence. Some bystanders make attempts to counter a person's concerning behavior, therefore they are not simply spectators.

SEVENTY-FIVE PERCENT of Sunni violent extremist cases studied had at least one bystander, but more than half of these individuals did nothing to intervene. Only *32 percent of bystanders* who observed concerning behaviors reported their concerns to law enforcement. This figure is similar across other threat groups in the United States, including:

- **ACTIVE SHOOTERS:** In *56 percent of incidents* in the United States, the attackers leaked their intent to commit violence to one or more third-party bystanders through verbal or written communications or online interactions, according to a 2018 FBI study. Juvenile active shooters (age 17 and younger) leaked their intent in *88 percent of the incidents* as compared with 51 percent of adults, according to the same study.
- **SCHOOL SHOOTERS:** In *more than 90 percent of cases*, the plotters communicated their intentions to carry out attacks, including in verbal statements, electronic messaging, and online posts, according to a 2021 National Threat Assessment Center study. Most often, the plotters' friends, classmates, or other peers observed these communications. In about two-fifths of these cases, plotters also documented their intentions in journals, documents, videos, and audio recordings that they did not share with others.

BYSTANDER CATEGORIES

FBI and NCTC categorize bystanders in Sunni violent extremist cases into four distinct groups:

- **FAMILY MEMBERS** (*41 percent of bystanders*), including parents, stepparents, spouses, siblings, cousins, and children, are more likely to observe behaviors associated with radicalization, including personality changes, increases in the amount of time spent online, surges in religiosity that cause conflict in the home, and changes in manner of dress or hygiene.
- **PEERS** (*39 percent of bystanders*), such as coworkers, students, close friends, and significant others, are more likely to observe behaviors associated with mobilization to violence, including attempts to recruit others, pursuing attack capabilities, and seeking sympathy for an attack.
- **COMMUNITY AUTHORITY FIGURES** (*15 percent of bystanders*), such as religious leaders, teachers, and work supervisors, are more likely to observe spontaneous displays of concerning behavior, including sporadic verbal support for violent extremism. They may also serve as interlocutors between family members and law enforcement.
- **STRANGERS** (*5 percent of bystanders*), such as commercial company employees who sell weapons or attack precursor materials, are likely to observe suspicious behaviors coupled with transactions. Although strangers were the smallest bystander group, they were the most likely to report concerning behaviors to law enforcement.

SCOPE NOTE

This pamphlet intends to help local communities and law enforcement personnel better understand bystanders and offer opportunities to encourage bystander interventions. The information herein originates from FBI and NCTC's Pathways to Extremist Violence (PEV) Project, FBI studies of active shooters, academic research, and input from Intelligence Community partners and law enforcement. While NCTC and FBI jointly address the threat of terrorism as part of the PEV Project, FBI also considers the implications for targeted violence, such as active- and school-shooter cases.

BARRIERS TO BYSTANDER REPORTING



The **INTERVENTION METHOD** most likely to disrupt a Sunni violent extremist's radicalization or mobilization activities is reporting concerns to law enforcement; however, some bystanders have significant psychological barriers to reporting.

Bystanders face **INTERNAL BARRIERS**, such as the inability to distinguish between individuals displaying genuine curiosity and radicalization, fearing being wrong about the potential signs of radicalization, and facing embarrassment for misinterpreting an event.

They also struggle with **BARRIERS SURROUNDING THEIR RELATIONSHIPS** with the subject. This may range from fear of betraying the trust of a loved one and violating a subject's privacy to having concerns for the social and legal implications of sharing information with authorities.

Finally, bystanders face **EXTERNAL BARRIERS** to reporting. Those who do not trust law enforcement are likely to consider reporting as a last resort, while others might fear that reporting an individual may bring further stigmatization to their communities. Some bystanders assume that others observing the same concerning behavior will intervene.

METHODOLOGY

The terrorism-related findings from the PEV Project are based on an FBI case-history review and coding for social science variables in approximately 150 fully adjudicated cases of Sunni violent extremists, most of whom were disrupted while attempting to travel to a conflict zone or conduct attacks in the United States from 2006 to mid-2016. The data included approximately 400 bystanders across the approximately 125 cases with bystanders.